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RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002075

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KN KS
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH FORMER PRESIDENT KIM
YOUNG-SAM

Classified By: Amb. Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Former President Kim Young-sam told the Ambassador on October 21 that he was still struggling from the "shock" of his father's death on September 30 and wondering how to comfort his daughter since her husband had recently suffered a stroke and would not recover. The Ambassador recalled and paid tribute to Kim's leading role in the struggle for democracy in the 1980s. Kim offered his usual sweeping analysis of the Korean political scene and lamented that there were no real leaders in the ruling party to steer the country in the right direction. President Lee's failures pained Kim; nonetheless, Kim said, he had supported Lee and would continue to support him. It was awful, however, that the Korean people had already lost interest in their president and what he did. END SUMMARY

FAMILY TRAGEDY

¶2. (C) Former President Kim Young-sam said that he was preoccupied these days because his youngest daughter's husband had suffered a stroke and there was "no hope" for recovery. Also, when his father passed away on September 30, it was still a shock, even though his father was 97, and left him feeling unglued. Over 10,000 people came to his father's five-day funeral to pay respects; Kim was so upset that he did not register who had come or not come until after the funeral. Kim said that almost 200 National Assembly members had made the four hour drive to Masan. Even lawmakers like Moon Kuk-hyun (head of the liberal Create Korea Party) and Kang Ki-gab (head of the left-wing Democratic Labor Party), whom he had previously not met, came to the funeral.

RUDDERLESS RULING PARTY

¶3. (C) Kim lamented that the Grand National Party (GNP) lacked quality leaders. GNP Chair Park Hee-tae was not active or engaged, and Park Geun-hye was doing nothing for the time being. Floor Leader Hong Joon-pyo, however, was better than Chairman Park. Kim noted that Hong, who was still thankful to Kim for giving him the nomination the first time he ran for the National Assembly, had made a big ceremonial bow to him at his father's funeral.

LEE LAME?

¶4. (C) Kim commented that no one in Korea now had any interest, as they should, in what President Lee Myung-bak was doing. It was a shame that President Lee's stature had slipped so far in just eight months. The Ambassador asked if Lee's recent radio address to the nation had helped generate interest; Kim responded that the address was "useless." Lee needed to define a broad direction for the country that could give hope to the Korean people but he had not done this, and Kim worried that Lee was not capable of doing so.

U.S.-ROK IN GOOD HANDS

¶5. (C) On a more positive note, Kim said Lee Myung-bak understood that Korea's relationship with the U.S. was of paramount importance. Kim said he had counseled Lee to focus his energies on building a strong relationship with the U.S. and that relationships with Japan and China would follow naturally. Lee had responded that he agreed with this principle.

NORTH KOREA

¶6. (C) Commenting on North Korea, President Kim said that North Korea's recent bluster was "just words." They had nothing to back up their threats, he asserted. There were many rumors about Kim Jong-il's (KJI) health and some reports out of Japan that KJI was dead. Kim did not know what was true but assumed that KJI was incapacitated since in the past when there were rumors about KJI's health, he would make an appearance to quell the speculation.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Kim Young-sam remains an astute observer of the Korean political scene. He was the only major political figure to predict that opening the Korean market to U.S. beef would cause an enormous popular backlash, and he did this several months ahead of the event. His remarks on the GNP leadership and President Lee are also spot on, we believe. Despite their party's overwhelming majority in the National Assembly, the Lee Administration continues to demonstrate a lack of action, and even a lack of will.

STEPHENS